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IRISH BIBLICAL STUDIES

Volume 18, June 1996

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(PART II)

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A TIME TO DANCE: REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES*

Rev. Professor J. Patton Taylor

Does not Wisdom cry out, does not understanding raise her voice? On the heights beside the way, in the paths she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries aloud: "To you, O men, I call, and my cry is to all humanity." (Proverbs 8.1-3)

This is the pen-picture in Proverbs chapter 8 where the poet personifies God's Wisdom making her appeal to all who will listen. She takes her stand not in the temple but at the entrance to the city gates: that place which throbs with the life of city and country alike, amid the hustle and bustle of camels and donkeys weighed down with their burdens, of merchants and traders, foreign and local, of soldiers and officials, money lenders and market women, lawyers and protesters..

Where might the writer of Proverbs make God's Wisdom take her stand today? The cathedral or the assembly hall? More likely, the City Hall, the Stock Exchange, the High Street¹. Her message would be to all those caught up in the helter-skelter of modern life. And I suspect that many of those who would hear her appeal would be people not often in Church; and I fear that among those most deaf to her teaching would be many in the religious and theological establishment - as of course was true also of the Ministry of Jesus Christ himself.

What is certainly true is that those of us who look back to the Old Testament through the glasses of reformed theology and tradition tend to view the Wisdom Literature of the OT as at the margin of our concern. Because of the particular thrust of much of our New

* Union College "Carey" Opening Lecture, 25 September 1995

¹ J Eaton (1989) makes a similar point.

Testament interpretation, we focus in our Old Testament studies on the law, the covenant, the sacrificial system, the prophets, the mighty saving acts of Yahweh in the history of Israel. Apart from a few well worn sermon texts, we find ourselves uncomfortable with the OT Wisdom literature - by which I mean in particular the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. For in those books, we find a God who seems to be universal, not just the covenant God of Israel; we find something more akin to a natural theology than a theology of revelation; we find a focus on this world rather than the next; we find material that seems to have been adapted from other ANE cultures and does not bear an authentic "made in Israel" stamp; we find no reference to the exodus, to election or the covenant, to the law, to the sacrificial system or to the temple, not even to the royal theology of Jerusalem - despite the close linking of the name of Solomon with the Wisdom tradition. We tend to summarise the central themes of the Old Testament without reference to the emphases of the Wisdom Literature; and then when the Wisdom books don't fit easily with our scheme we, in practice, relegate them to a second tier within the canon of scripture.

This tendency of course is not new. The Jews relegated the Wisdom books to the Writings, that third section of the canon after the all-important Law and Prophets (by contrast with the Greek canonical order followed in our English Bibles where the Wisdom books take their place after the books of History and before the books of Prophecy).

The various classics of Old Testament Theology of this century have all had difficulty in accommodating the Wisdom books as they have sought to codify the OT message and /or find a central theme to which all aspects of OT theology can be related. Eichrodt with his focus on "covenant" and Von Rad with his emphasis on historical traditions still stand as models of OT theology - and neither of them found it easy to fit Wisdom literature into their overall scheme.

A more recent scholar, BS Childs, in practice devotes little space to Wisdom in his OT Theology², even though his canonical approach might have made it easier for him to give a pride of place to the

² BS Childs, *OT Theology in a canonical Context* SCM 1985

writings of the sages. In 1992 RE Clements published a series of lectures on Wisdom³ in which he apologises for the fact that in his earlier OT Theology⁴ he had taken *no account of the importance of the Israelite Wisdom tradition*.

It is perhaps ironic that as Christians we downplay the Wisdom literature of the OT, when, arguably, Jesus, in his teaching, reflects the Wisdom literature more than any other part of the Old Testament. The parables and the Sermon on the Mount for example contain innumerable echoes of the Wisdom tradition and method. Bultmann spoke of the "necessity of understanding the synoptic sayings in the context of Jewish Wisdom"⁵. Some scholars refer to Jesus as primarily a Wisdom teacher or as the "ultimate expression of Wisdom"⁶. In a book published earlier this year, Claus Westermann speaks of:-

... a task that heretofore has scarcely been recognised in terms of its importance: namely a comprehensive and detailed examination of the relationship between Jesus' preaching and the early proverbial wisdom of Israel.⁷

He goes on to speak of the Wisdom heritage as a main link between the OT and the teaching of Jesus.

W Brueggemann, in his refreshingly challenging style, has argued that this tendency to downplay Wisdom literature is no accident. He says, for example:-

I argue that the recovery of wisdom materials as a legitimate perhaps even central feature of scripture constitutes a considerable threat to the theological establishment that dominates much of Protestantism.⁸

He continues:-

-
- ³ RE Clements, *Wisdom in Theology* Paternoster 1992 p 7
⁴ RE Clements *OT Theology: a fresh approach* London 1978
⁵ R Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition*, 4th edn, 1970, p 113
⁶ Max Kuchler, *Fruhjudische Weishheitstraditionen*, OBO 1979 pp 157 ff
⁷ Westermann (1995) p 113
⁸ Brueggemann (1972) p 13

The wise in Israel characteristically appreciate life, love life, value it, enjoy it. They appreciate the best learning, the newest knowledge, and the most ingenious cultural achievements.

He contends that this Wisdom outlook was also true of the Reformers, especially the Swiss reformers, though it sadly has not generally been true of the latter-day children of the Reformation.

He goes further:-

Sometimes we are not real. Faith can become a way to work the system, to explain life, to manipulate for our own ends. Theology can become so safe and respectable that it is the announcement of yesterday's authenticities in the face of new realities, the parroting of old certainties, the defence of old positions, ... the passion to make events and persons fit the scheme of how they are supposed to be.⁹

Wisdom, he maintains, challenges this mindset. Wisdom will not be content with yesterday's answers. He concludes:-

It is not our wisdom traditions that are in question but our unfair, one-sided handling of scripture, which has celebrated and used only those parts of scripture which have supported our dogmatic presuppositions and commitments.

It is my first contention this afternoon that we must face up to the implications of Wisdom literature - and not just in the Old Testament classroom but in our understanding and living out of the Christian faith as a whole. **Wisdom literature is no less Scripture and no less Gospel than the Law and the Prophets.**

Now if Christian theologians have been uncomfortable with OT Wisdom literature in general, when it comes in particular to the book of Ecclesiastes then that unease manifests itself in an extreme form.

Nietsche had referred to Ecclesiastes as an "eerie guest" within the canon. Von Rad goes so far as to say that in Ecclesiastes Wisdom completely *lost its last contact with Israel's old way of thinking in*

*terms of saving history and ... fell back on the cyclical way of thinking common in the east ... in an utterly secular form.*¹⁰

Rylaarsdam in Peake's Commentary reflects the scholarly orthodoxy of his generation when he describes Ecclesiastes as a *cul-de-sac of rational scepticism*; and he goes on:-

While strict logic should have driven him to nihilism, he seems to end up as an agnostic relativist.¹¹

In one of the most recent commentaries on Ecclesiastes (1988), James Crenshaw maintains this negative tradition of interpretation, giving this summary of the book's message:-

Life is pointless, totally absurd. This oppressive message lies at the heart of the Bible's strangest book. ... Virtue does not bring reward. ... The deity stands distant.¹²

An ancient rabbi even wrote that King Solomon wrote Song of Songs in his youthful ardour, Proverbs in his maturity, and Ecclesiastes in his senility!

Now of course the Book has not been altogether without its supporters. A common view in the early Christian writings saw Proverbs as a handbook for beginners in Wisdom, while Ecclesiastes was a textbook for the advanced course - with its emphasis on despising the things of this world. In the last century, Delitzsch¹³ regarded the Preacher (as the author of Ecclesiastes is customarily known) as the epitome of piety.

Some of the more recent studies and commentaries have also sought a more positive evaluation of the Preacher's message - but nonetheless it remains an inescapable fact that Ecclesiastes more than any of the Wisdom books strikes a chord which seems discordant with much of the rest of the OT. The cautionary note sounded by the German scholar Lohfink should therefore be ringing in our ears, when he warns against defining the essential message of

¹⁰ G Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, ET Oliver and Boyd 1962, Vol 1, p 455

¹¹ in Peake's Commentary on the Bible, p387

¹² Crenshaw (1988) p 23

¹³ Delitzsche (1891)

the Old Testament without taking account of the Preacher in our definition:-

When one characterises Ecclesiastes, as has become fashionable among exegetes, in comparison with the rest of the Bible, as “no personal God”, “denial of human freedom”, “falling away from salvation-history thought”, “a loss of trust in life”, one flees the challenge which this book puts to the mind; one exposes oneself to the danger of even understanding wrongly what one was intending to defend.”¹⁴

This is particularly so when one considers the number of points of contact there are between Ecclesiastes and the teaching of Jesus¹⁵.

What then are we to make of this enigmatic book, in which God is never called by his covenant name, Yahweh, and which is summed up for most scholars, even those who seek to be positive in their assessment of it, by the recurring phrase: *Vanity of vanities! All is vanity?* The Good news Bible puts it more forcefully: *Life is useless, all useless*. Can we still maintain that Wisdom literature, including Ecclesiastes is just as much scripture and just as much gospel as the Law and the Prophets?

Now may I say at this point that there is clearly no time here to discuss questions such as the authorship and date of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Suffice it to say for now that few even among conservative scholars would want to attribute the authorship of the Book to Solomon. Most prefer the view that the Preacher puts himself so to speak into Solomon's shoes, inviting the listener to do the same, so that Preacher and hearer together are forced to the conclusion that even if one had the wealth, pleasure, and power of a super-Solomon it would all be *useless / vanity* in the end.

As to dating, the mainstream of scholarship dates Ecclesiastes in the 3rd century BCE - though it should be noted that one important

¹⁴ Lohfink, pp 15f

¹⁵ For example, Mat 16.26 cf Ecc 1.3; Mat 6.28ff cf Ecc 2.4ff; Mat 16.27 cf Ecc 3.17; Luke 12.15 cf Ecc 5.10; Luke 21.34f cf Ecc 9.12; Luke 12.3 cf Ecc 10.20; Mat 25.15ff cf Ecc 11.1ff; Mat 5.42 cf Ecc 11.2; Mat 24.29 cf Ecc 12.2; Luke 23.46 cf Ecc 12.7

scholar, Mitchell Dahood¹⁶, has argued on linguistic grounds that a date during the period of the monarchy is preferable. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this lecture, I will assume that the Preacher is an unknown author from the 3rd century.

However, before considering the message of the Book, it is first necessary to look critically at a number of presuppositions which underlie much scholarly discussion of Ecclesiastes and which have helped to reinforce the wholly negative interpretation which has been so commonplace.

First of all, it is commonly presupposed that in the normative Wisdom tradition Israel, in common with the ANE in general, there was a strong emphasis on what is sometimes called the *doctrine of deed-consequence* or the *doctrine of retribution and reward*. Under this doctrine, the good could expect always to prosper while the wicked would inevitably suffer in the end. The diligent man would prosper, while the sluggard would find himself in poverty.

Now the presupposition often is that the Book of Proverbs is founded on this doctrine of retribution and reward. It is then further presupposed that, after the exile, and perhaps because of it, there was an increasing dissatisfaction with the whole Wisdom tradition, because of a growing awareness that it is the good who are so often the ones who suffer and the wicked the ones who prosper. Either the Wisdom teaching was wrong about God; or else God was no longer on the throne of the universe. Indeed scholars commonly refer to this reaction as a "crisis" which threatened to undermine the Wisdom tradition completely.

¹⁶ M.J Dahood, "Canaanite-Phoenician influence in Qoheleth" *Bib* 33 (1952) pp 30ff; also "The Phoenician background of Qoheleth" *Bib* 47 (1966) pp 264ff. For specific criticism of Dahood, see Gordis in *Bib* 41 (1966) pp 395ff. For views similar to those of Dahood, see JR Davila in *Maarav* 5-6 (1990) pp69ff; and also GL Archer in *JETS* 12 (1969) pp 167ff. While Dahood's view is undoubtedly attractive, the scholarly consensus (from the time of Delitzsch's quip, *If the Book of koheleth was of Solomonic origin then there is no history of the hebrew language*) has been that Qoheleth's Hebrew is late post-exilic tending towards Mishnaic Hebrew.

On this view, it was specifically in response to this crisis that the books of Job and Ecclesiastes were written - challenging and indeed rejecting the conventional and more optimistic Wisdom of Proverbs with its doctrine of retribution¹⁷. For example, James Crenshaw, in his recent commentary wrote:-

These [the Preacher's] views contrast radically with earlier teachings expressed in the Book of Proverbs in which fear of God and adherence to the insights of previous generations **guarantee** long life, prosperity, progeny, and honour ... In the resulting religious and intellectual crisis, the voices of Job and Qoheleth rose to express **alternative** perspectives. ... Qoheleth discerns no moral order at all. His argument strikes at the foundation of the sages' universe.¹⁸

Thus Job and Ecclesiastes are widely credited by scholars as being responsible for the final breakdown of a belief in the mechanical correspondence between good / evil actions and good / evil results; and they therefore represent a rejection of the whole basis on which the Book of Proverbs rests.

But can it be true to say that the dilemma of undeserved suffering was never a problem for generations of wise men until the Preacher and the author of Job drew attention to it? It is manifestly self-evident to anyone with any experience of life, and who looks honestly at the world around him, that people do not always get what they deserve, that the good do not always prosper while the wicked often do, and that the hard-worker does not always gain over the indolent. It is verging on the absurd to suggest that the wise men behind the Book of Proverbs should have sought to insist on a strict deed-consequence doctrine of retribution and reward in the face of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary. It is certainly true that the Book of Proverbs sees **some** connexion of righteousness / wisdom with happiness on the one hand and of wickedness / folly with

¹⁷ The suffering servant theme of the latter chapters of Isaiah is also often seen as a parallel attempt to deal with the question of undeserved suffering.

¹⁸ Crenshaw (1988) p 23 (my emphasis). Blenkinsopp (1983) had taken a similar view: see pp 46ff.

suffering on the other hand - but not the kind of mechanical doctrine of retribution and reward that (for example) Job's friends appear to represent. Roland Murphy has recently made make a similar point when he says:-

It is questionable if this "deed-consequence" mindset is as important as claimed. The sages were aware of God's surprises!¹⁹

It is important to remember that the Book of Proverbs is not a book of laws. Laws are quite different from proverbs - which are good advice towards getting the best out of life. When talking to students about the Book of Proverbs, I like to compare it to the Highway Code. The Highway Code, as its introduction makes clear, is not primarily a book of laws (though it does contain in an appendix a list of the law's specific demands). Like the Book of Proverbs it contains a good deal of common-sense good advice. (It says, for example: *at a level crossing without gates, always give way to trains!*) There is certainly the implication that if you follow the good advice of the Highway Code you are more likely to be safe on the road, and that if you neglect the code you are much more likely to become a cropper. But there can be no guarantee either way. All kinds of circumstances beyond our control, including the behaviour of other drivers, may bring grief to the innocent; and we all know of the most abominable drivers who seem to have nine lives. So it is with the Book of Proverbs, a sort of Highway Code for life, which if we follow it will certainly increase our chances of a safe passage through life, and *vice versa* - **but there can be no guarantees.**

It is worth noting in passing that the so-called deuteronomic or covenant theology of much of the Old Testament is sometimes cited as proof that there was a clear doctrine of retribution and reward entrenched in Israelite religious thinking. Under this covenant theology the nation of Israel was promised prosperity from Yahweh as the reward of loyalty and obedience, whereas national disaster would follow unfaithfulness and disobedience. But in the first place the deuteronomic theology was addressed to the nation not to individuals; and there was no implicit assumption that all good

¹⁹

Murphy (1992) p lxvi

people would escape when the nation as a whole was to suffer - or *vice versa*. A national theology is quite different from a doctrine of automatic retribution for the individual. Indeed the deuteronomic narratives are themselves full of examples of undeserved suffering. Furthermore, the national theology of election and covenant is surely presented to us as an **exceptional** arrangement between God and the **single** nation of Israel.. It was not claimed as a norm of the universe that **all** righteous nations will prosper. Rather it was asserted that, exceptionally, indeed uniquely, Yahweh would ensure the prosperity of his one chosen people subject to their obedience. One could indeed go so far as to say that the deuteronomic theology carries within it the implicit assumption that a mechanical doctrine of retribution and reward is **not** the norm of God's creation.

Now, if the Book of Proverbs was not in fact based on an inflexible doctrine of retribution and reward, and if the deuteronomic theology is about something fundamentally quite different, then we cannot argue that the main purpose of the writing of Job and Ecclesiastes was to question and reject that doctrine as it was found in earlier Biblical literature.

What may of course be true is that the Preacher found that in his own day (as indeed today?) that there were small-minded religious people (of whom Job's friends have become the stereotype) who wanted to turn the genuine Wisdom tradition into a doctrinaire system of absolutes²⁰. Some so-called Wisdom schools may have degenerated into this kind of thinking. This may explain the Preacher's occasional scathing comments about the value of Wisdom. It is certainly true that the Preacher is concerned with the issue of the suffering of good people contrasted with the prosperity of the wicked and with the implications of this for faith.²¹ Indeed, more than any other OT writer, he faces up to those issues fair and

²⁰ The later 2nd century BCE Book of Ecclesiasticus shows a tendency for the Wisdom tradition to become more and more legalistic - a direction of course which led in the end to something of the Pharasaism against which Jesus directs much of his wisdom teaching.

²¹ eg 3.16

square. Part of his overall contribution to the Wisdom tradition is undoubtedly his exploration of how best one can live **and have faith** in a world in which there is no sure retribution or reward. He does this, however, from **within** the mainstream Wisdom tradition (as represented by the Book of Proverbs) - not as a rejection of the literature that had gone before.

The **second** common presupposition that I want to deal with is the frequent contention that the Book of Ecclesiastes is incoherent and contradictory, with little thread of logic running through it. Certainly the book has defied any consistent structural analysis. Various explanations are offered for the apparent contradictions. The author may be quoting or alluding to a variety of views that are not necessarily his own - commenting on the relative merits of differing standpoints both traditional and contemporary. Sometimes the discussion may take the form of a debate with an imaginary interlocutor in which opposing perspectives are weighed up. In places the Preacher may be reflecting on different views which he has held at various stages of his own life. Or the author may simply be seeking to reflect the uncertainties and ambiguities of life.

Various ingenious theories have been put forward as to the structure of book. ADG Wright, for example, has extensively applied the study of numerology, noting many fascinating features²². To take but one example of many, if one takes the numerical value of the Hebrew letters that make up the phrase *vanity of vanities all is vanity* and then adds them up, the answer comes to 216 - which is the exact number of verses in the book²³. There is certainly significant evidence that though the author may have cultivated an informal, colloquial, non-literary style, nonetheless the book is written in an altogether intricate, careful, and deliberate manner: it is neither haphazard nor incoherent.

Kathleen Farmer in her 1991 commentary suggests:-

²² ADG Wright in: CBQ 30 (1968) pp 313ff; CBQ 42 (1980) pp 35ff; and CBQ 45 (1983) pp 32ff

²³ apart from the few verses that have been added later to the final chapter as a commendation of the work

... that the material in Ecclesiastes fits into the category of **journaling** (the process of keeping a reflective journal) better than it conforms to our modern notions of a treatise or a reasoned argument on a single subject.²⁴

Another view to which I am particularly attracted is the suggestion of John Eaton who has helpfully likened Ecclesiastes to:-

... those modern plays for one actor. The actor, perhaps seated simply on stage at a table, takes the part of a character with experiences to relate and relive, to ponder and evaluate. The audience are closely engaged .. and are led to think again about the nature of life, with all its hopes and disappointments. ... Ecclesiastes is quite like such a play.²⁵

This analogy is particularly helpful if (as I will suggest below) it was the Preacher's intention to engage primarily with an audience outside of the community of the faithful.

The **third** presupposition that I want to challenge is with regard to the accuracy of translation and the significance of that familiar phrase *vanity, all is vanity*. The Hebrew word is **הבל**. It occurs 37 times in the book - and it seems literally to have meant *a puff of breath / wind*. The usage in the Hebrew is thus a metaphor - and the fact that we in our EVV have abstract terms such as *vanity* (or other words which imply *uselessness* or *pointlessness*) is the result of a long historic process of translation, or mistranslation, that goes back through the LXX and the Vulgate, each stage of which has introduced connotations that may be far removed from the meaning of the original²⁶. It would perhaps have been better if our translations had simply used some such phrase as *puff of wind*, leaving us to elucidate the metaphor for ourselves from the context.

In a recent study (1993), Daniel Fredericks has argued convincingly, on linguistic and contextual grounds, that the object of the metaphor from a *puff of breath* was **not** to imply the negative connotations of emptiness, uselessness and vanity which have long been associated

²⁴ K Farmer (1991 p 149

²⁵ J Eaton (1989) p 8

²⁶ The LXX has *ματαιότης*, which in turn was represented in the Vulgae as *vanitas*.

with the phrase from the LXX onwards, but to imply simply *fleetingness* or *transience*, without any necessarily negative overtones.²⁷

Kathleen Farmer has similarly argued that the point of the metaphor is lack of permanence rather than lack of value²⁸.

Equally interesting is the contention of Graham Ogden's that **הבל** is a technical term for the Preacher to which he gives a very specific meaning of his own. For Ogden **הבל**:-

identifies the enigmatic or ironic dimension of human experience; it suggests that life is not fully comprehensible.

It in no sense carries the meaning of vanity or meaninglessness.²⁹

The basis of both these suggestions is that the definition of the Preacher's use of this metaphor must be contextual, from within the usage of Ecclesiastes itself - though the scholars concerned can each also show parallel instances elsewhere in the Old Testament to back-up the theory. In other words, they argue that we must not gratuitously import into Ecclesiastes connotations which come from the usage of other texts - and especially not if as a result the Preacher is wrongly made in our translation to appear either totally cynical or totally incoherent. Instead of *vanity of vanities*, the allusion on Frederick's view is to the *fleeting* nature of life; whereas on Ogden's thesis the allusion is to the *mystery* of everything in life and creation. The important point is that neither of these alternative definitions carries with it the negative implications of *emptiness*,

²⁷ DC Fredericks (1993). He argues in effect that the connotation of *emptiness* was an illegitimate transfer of significances from other OT instances of the *hebel* - not justified by the actual contexts in which it is used in Ecclesiastes. He cites Ps 143. 3f and Ps 39.5,11,12 as instances outside of Ecclesiastes where *hebel* is used as *transitor* without any connotation of emptiness.

²⁸ op cit pp 142 ff. Farmer also makes the point that in several places (eg 1.14; 2.11; 4.4; 6.9) **הבל** and **דח** are virtually equated - the latter presumably having neither the insubstantial nor the negative overtones so often associated with **הבל**:

²⁹ Ogden (1989) p 14

uselessness, or *lack of value* that have so profoundly influenced almost all interpretations of the book. Fredericks concludes:-

It is the best of both worlds to maintain a legitimate biblical connotation for **הבל** ... and to receive in return a more coherent and a more conventional sage.

Quite apart from the precise connotation of the **הבל**-metaphor, there is the equally important question as to whether the phrase does in fact represent the book's focus and thesis. Is the Preacher in fact **himself** proclaiming, as centuries of interpretation have assumed, that life and everything in creation is **הבל**, a mere puff of wind (in whatever sense of the metaphor)? Or does this catch-phrase represent rather the stereotyped view that the author is putting forward to consider, to debate, and eventually to reject? Derek Kidner says, for example:-

It is easy to forget that, if Qoheleth is taking the stance of the worldly man to show what it involves, this is the very outlook he must expound. And if he is doing it to expose it and create a hunger for something better ... he should not be identified with it except by virtue of his fellow-feeling and depth of insight.³⁰

Accordingly, having rejected these three common presuppositions, I would like to contend this afternoon that far from being the most negative book in the Bible, Ecclesiastes has in fact a very positive overall thrust. It is **a discussion or debate on various approaches as to how life can best be lived with happiness and purpose** - a discussion that must nonetheless take account of the fact that we live in a world in which there is much injustice, a world which we can do little to change, and a world in which we cannot know what the future holds for us.

The Preacher does warn us that this quest, if we are intellectually honest, rather than simply doctrinaire or dogmatic, may often stretch any faith we have to the limit and may indeed at times leave us concluding in frustration: *its all a puff of wind!* Nonetheless he asserts that it is indeed God's will that we should seek, and that

³⁰

Kidner (1976) p 27

normally we should find, "life in all its fullness" (to use a NT phrase from the lips of Jesus³¹). RE Clements puts it this way:-

... in Qoheleth we begin to encounter serious wrestling with the question of human happiness ... to focus attention on the life-goals of each individual human being and the relationship of such happiness to virtue.

Notice that the paramount question is not (as in much of the rest of the OT Scriptures): *How can I be righteous?* The paramount question in this book is more like: *How can I be happy?* And why should we feel guilty or embarrassed about such a quest when we are followers of the one who said:-

I have come that you might have life - life in all its fullness. This is just one of the many interesting points of contact between Ecclesiastes and the New Testament Gospel.

Secondly, I want to contend that the Preacher may be addressing himself primarily to people who are not necessarily unbelievers but who are nonetheless outside of established religion. He therefore meets them where they are, amid their scepticism and frustration, acknowledging from the outset that there are many unanswered questions about life and the world around us which he refuses to run away from or offer glib answers to. He does not preach at them, but nonetheless leaves them at the end of the argument with the almost inescapable (though in the book almost unspoken) conclusion that faith in God does work and should be investigated further.

Now in examining some of these ideas more fully, there are several things that we can usefully notice. First of all, the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, power, even wisdom and book-knowledge are from the outset rejected as the path to happiness and fulfilment in life. The Preacher appeals to those who have already tried out these pursuits and found them in the end to be no more than הבל - a puff of wind - not least in view of the stark reality of which we are reminded many times in the book that each and every one of us will die.

To state as Crenshaw does that *because death ends every human achievement, Qoheleth has concluded that life has no meaning*³² is

³¹ Mat 7.7 & John 10.10

³² Crenshaw (1988) p 25

altogether to miss the point of what the Preacher is saying. Rather, the Preacher is asserting that no theory of human happiness will be valid if it does not face up to the reality of death. Blenkinsopp remarks:-

Of all things death is least under our control, and to accept this situation is to free the mind from a major source of crippling anxiety. ... It seems that Qoheleth is offering a positive answer to the numbing questions which death poses to any reflective person.³³

We might note in passing how amazing it is in any age that those who have either a wealth of goods or a wealth of learning find it so hard to interpret life in the context of that certainty of death - a truth which is so often self-evident to the unsophisticated. (I often think in this connexion of a man who worked on a farm which belongs to friends of mine. His name was Paddy. He was what in the country was called a "simple soul": he could neither read nor write. But sometimes for all his lack of sophistication he had profound things to say. On one occasion my farmer friend and one of his neighbours were discussing the serious implications of the price per acre that land had reached in a recent auction. It was Paddy who turned to me and who said: "I don't know why they're so worried about the price of land, for one bit, six foot by two, will do the both of them in the end." The Preacher would have approved of Paddy!) One is reminded of the chilling words of Jesus at the end of the parable of the rich man with many barns and storehouses: -

You fool. This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared whose then will they be?³⁴

Indeed there is so much in the teaching of Jesus that echoes the thinking of the Preacher:-

A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.³⁵

³³ op cit p 66

³⁴ Luke 12.22

³⁵ Luke 12.15

Consider the lilies of the field ... they neither toil nor spin,
yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of
these.³⁶

an allusion surely to the picture of Solomon in Ecc 2.

Roland Murphy has asserted that the *kerygma* of Wisdom literature is *life* itself³⁷. On this Brueggemann comments that *life* in this context includes *all the assets - emotional, physical, psychical, social, spiritual - which permit joy and security and wholeness*³⁸. And the Preacher is primarily speaking of life "under the sun", life in this world. The Preacher will not accept a deferred heavenly goal. He does not deny that there may be a heaven - but he will not have it as a substitute for the legitimate goal of fullness of life in the here and now.

What then will bring happiness and fulfilment in life, if wealth, pleasure, power or even wisdom will not deliver? The Preacher is quite clear on this, and repeats himself on several occasions in the book. We are to enjoy the simple pleasures of life: eating and drinking, home and family life. We should take pleasure in our work, but avoid any workaholic tendency. He would have approved of the words of the popular song *One Day at a Time*. He regards these true pleasures and the ability to enjoy them as gifts from God not to be in any way underestimated or trivialised. One quotation from the text will be representative of several such passages:-

I know that there is nothing better for them than to be
happy and enjoy themselves as long as they live; also that it
is God's gift to man that every one should eat and drink and
take pleasure in all his toil³⁹.

Fredericks comments that since life is so transitory one's enjoyment should be an urgent, wholehearted objective in life.⁴⁰

³⁶ Mat 6. 28f

³⁷ R Murphy, "The Kerygma of the Book of Proverbs"
Interpretation XX (1966) pp 3ff

³⁸ op cit p 15

³⁹ 3:12-13 (RSV). See also 2.24; 3.22; 5.18; 8.15; 9.7-9; 11.9 - 12.7

⁴⁰ op cit p 77

Of course it goes without saying that the Preacher is not recommending a debased pleasure seeking, an Epicurean hedonism, an *eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die* philosophy. There is a time to laugh - but it is not a shallow frivolity. Side by side with this emphasis on enjoyment there is an emphasis on the need for virtue; and (in Clements' words) for:-

a distinct awareness that the formation of a personal character and the acquisition of resilience to cope with life's demands and disappointments is a primary goal of wisdom.⁴¹

Martin Luther's summary may be of interest:-

Solomon wants to put us at peace and to give us a quiet mind in everyday affairs and business of this life so that we may live contentedly in the present without care and yearning about the future.⁴²

The Preacher is certainly enjoining on us that God wants us positively to enjoy daily life whenever possible. In the words of the well-known third chapter of the book, there is indeed a time for joy, for dancing, for kissing and making love, as well as for the sadder, sombre side of life which we must also encounter - and we must enjoy those good times to the full when they come. If we don't do so, because perhaps of worries and cares about things over which we have no control, then we are squandering God's greatest gift to us for this world.

Ogden argues this from his analysis of the book's structure, concluding that:-

its thesis is that life under God must be taken and enjoyed in all its mystery⁴³

and he rightly goes on:-

These calls to enjoyment are actually theological statements of faith in a just and loving God, despite many signs which might appear contrary⁴⁴.

⁴¹ op cit p 38

⁴² "Notes on Ecclesiastes" in *Luther's Works* 15:7-8, quoted in Murphy (1992) p lii

⁴³ op cit p 14

⁴⁴ op cit p 22

Scholars have of course found different ways of relating the message of Ecclesiastes to that of the Gospel and the NT story - apart that is from the specific correspondences we have already seen between the teaching of the Preacher and that of Jesus. One interesting comment has been made by the German scholar Hertzberg, who ended his commentary with the words:-

The Book of Qoheleth is the most staggering messianic prophecy to appear in the Old Testament.⁴⁵

By this he seems to have meant that that while the Preacher indeed provides for enjoyment in this life, he also tackles life's fundamental questions in such a way that the Gospel message and NT belief in the life to come are the inevitable logical next step.

To this I would like to add that the Preacher's message, with its frank acknowledgement that there is no automatic reward for righteousness or punishment for the wicked, side by side with insistence on a just and righteous God, thereby lays an essential foundation stone for the NT doctrine of justification by faith. Even our good works are no more than **הבל**, a mere puff of wind. How can it ever make sense to argue that a few good deeds in this life could ever entitle us to an eternity of reward as of right? **The doctrine of justification by faith is thus a logical next step to the Preacher's outlook.**

Several commentators quite rightly point out that Ecclesiastes tentatively paves the way for the development of a belief in life after death - a subject on which the Old Testament is overall strangely silent but yet which has become highly developed by New Testament times. As often, the Preacher does not discuss the topic explicitly, but his penetrating analysis of the implications of life and death leaves the reader with little option but to consider that as a corollary to life "under the sun": there must be another life to come. Certainly there are several passages that imply an after-life⁴⁶ - though the Preacher acknowledges that he has no idea what form this might take, and he carefully avoids any suggestion that our conduct in

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H Hertzberg, *Der Prediger* 1963

⁴⁶

See eg 3.21; 6.12; 7.14

this life should be motivated primarily by some expectation of reward in the next.

Two of the commentators who point up the hints in Ecclesiastes of life after death are Farmer and Ogden. Ogden concludes that Ecclesiastes:-

represents the earliest OT document to express, albeit in a tentative manner, the thought that there is something beyond death.⁴⁷

The last (but by no means least) contention that I want to put forward this afternoon is that the Book of Ecclesiastes may have a much more important part to play than has been realised in Christian witness and apologetic among the unchurched community. I began this lecture by pointing out that Wisdom is pictured in Prov 8 as standing at the city gate, at the heart of the hustle and bustle of city life. The Book of Ecclesiastes, perhaps most of all books in the OT, meets modern men and women at the point of their pressures and busyness, recognising their questionings about the meaning of life, about the justice or otherwise of God, amid their disillusionment with materialism, and their suspicion of established religion and its tendency to duck out of the problems of this life by a slick appeal to the next. To begin our apologetic to such people with the themes of Law and Covenant might well seem to them to be a dated irrelevance. But perhaps the Preacher is the one who can reach them - ironically as the one who does not preach, or at least does not preach at them, but who nonetheless can lead them to a point where faith in God and indeed the Gospel message is the only feasible way forward. The Preacher is the one who can present to them, among other things, a God who actually wants people to experience "life in all its fullness", in this world as well as in the next, and a God who can actually deliver where other pursuits and philosophies have failed. Whybray has commented:-

One way of approaching his [the Preacher's] thought is to see him as a theologian or perhaps even an apologist who was trying to find a way of reconciling the Jewish faith

which he had inherited with the world as he knew it: a "modern" world which was undergoing rapid change.⁴⁸

John Eaton speaks of the Preacher as the one who:-

preferred to feel the destitution and futility of life rather than be fed with what is not truth. He sees the evil under the sun so clearly that he cries that it might be better to be dead ... When such a man as this can yet teach a way of joy, he has earned a hearing⁴⁹.

Brueggemann also speaks of the whole of the Wisdom literature, including Ecclesiastes, as the best means of establishing contact between Biblical faith and our contemporary culture.⁵⁰ He says:-

Wisdom is contextualisation at its best.⁵¹

There are many facets to Ecclesiastes. I have sought only to highlight a few in a deliberately selective way to suggest a different overall picture from that which has conventionally been presented.

The Wisdom literature is part of Scripture - **including** the Book of Ecclesiastes. We need to take its peculiar insights on board if our overall understanding of the message of the Scripture is to be complete. It provides us with several interesting links between the OT and the NT. It represents an approach to witness and apologetic from which we can learn much as we seek to relate our faith to the modern world.

Crenshaw remarks in his commentary:-

As in a kaleidoscope, apparently incongruent features of the text come together, almost magically, framing many different but meaningful configurations.⁵²

As I shake the kaleidoscope of Ecclesiastes this afternoon, out of the whole complex of ideas contained in the Book, the thing that comes to the centre of the picture for me above all else is the simple fact that **God actually wants us to enjoy life here and now**. If we want to communicate our faith in today's world, then, yes we must face

⁴⁸ op cit p 82

⁴⁹ op cit p 135

⁵⁰ op cit p 7

⁵¹ idem p 89

⁵² op cit p 49

Taylor, **A time to dance**, *Irish Biblical Studies* 18 June 1996

the difficult questions of suffering and sin, of guilt and forgiveness; but we must also convey the message that, in God's book, in the Preacher's words:

there is a time to dance.

J. Patton Taylor

THE ELDERSHIP IN MARTIN BUCER AND JOHN CALVIN*

Rev. Dr. R. E. H. Uprichard

The office of eldership within the reformed Church has provoked animated discussion right from its inception.** Did the reformers invent this office or rediscover it? Did they recover it from the early Church or from the Scripture or from both? Was the practical necessity of discipline within the Church in general and the preservation of ecclesiastical control of the Church over against state intervention in particular the primary motivation for the introduction of the eldership? Did the reformers only seek biblical 'justification' as a secondary measure? Are we to equate 'presbyter' and 'bishop' in the New Testament, or the presbyter of the New Testament with the elder of the reformed Church today? Are there grounds for maintaining the duality of ruling and teaching functions within the eldership - the 'minister' or 'teaching elder' and the 'ruling elders' comprising the 'Kirk Session' of reformed Churches today?

These are by no means purely academic questions. Our answers to them will determine our view of biblical polity, our scriptural concept of Church government. These answers are all the more important in the ecumenical scene today. In a word, this is the

* We would thank Professor Howard Marshall, editor of *The Evangelical Quarterly* for permission to re-print this article in honour of Professor Russell. Rev. Dr Uprichard not only did both his Masters and Doctorate under the supervision of Professor Russell, but he also contributed to the first Issue of *Irish Biblical Studies*. It is a great pleasure to welcome him back to the pages of *Irish Biblical Studies*.

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scenario of on-going debate between those affirming a three-fold order of ordained ministry: bishop, priest and deacon, the 'Episcopal' perception of the majority of Christendom, and those professing a two-fold form: bishop = presbyter = teaching/ruling elder and deacon, the understanding generally maintained within Reformed Churches. The Christian Church zealous to know that unity which is Christ's will for his Church as it enters the twenty-first century cannot afford to ignore how Christ wants his Church to be ordered according to his Word until he returns.

One of the most recent, pertinent and challenging comments on this issue is T. F. Torrance's booklet *The Eldership in the Reformed Church*.⁵³ Reviewing the antecedents of eldership in the early Church documents and extant inscriptions Professor Torrance claims that there are no grounds for equating this office with that of 'presbyter'. According to his understanding, the reformers imported the idea of the *seniores* from the North African Church of the 4th/5th century and then looked for biblical evidence for this. Calvin's position is described as 'clearly ambiguous, for while his interpretation of 1 Tim. 5:17 appeared to sanction the theory that elders were presbyters, he did not embody it in the constitution of the Genevan Church for he refused to entertain the idea that elders might be admitted to the Presbytery or that they should join with ministers in acts of ordination by the laying on of hands.' Professor Torrance's contention is 'that there is no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call "elders", let alone the theory that there are two kinds of presbyter'.⁵⁴ He further suggests that the nearest approximation to our idea of elder is the deacon of the Pastoral Epistles and that the appointment of the Seven in Acts 6 is not the origin of the diaconate but of the presbyterate. His conclusion with regard to our idea of elder is that we can turn only to Presbyterian tradition rather than to Holy Scripture for any guidance in the fulfillment of their duties.

These observations have far-reaching effects and call for a reinvestigation of the eldership in the reformed Church during its

⁵³ T.F. Torrance, *The Eldership in the Reformed Church* (Edinburgh, 1984).

⁵⁴ T.F. Torrance, *op. cit.* 57.

most formative stage in the teaching of Bucer and Calvin. Are there any clues in the developing view of these two reformers which can help answer the questions posed by the debate?

Martin Bucer

Bucer's concept of the eldership was set within the context of a lifelong personal conviction about the importance of discipline within the Church and a constant attempt to establish an ecclesiastical discipline independent of the secular power. This interest arises as early as 1523 in his work 'Das Ym Selbs' which introduces the theme that no-one should live for himself but for his neighbour and attempts an answer as to how a man can do this. At this time, however, Bucer's belief that the early Church ought to prevent unworthy people from participating in the Lord's Supper marked the sum of his conception of discipline.

Bucer's contact with Oecolampadius around 1530 stimulated his views. Oecolampadius maintained that discipline was both desirable and possible and should be under Church control. At first Bucer was doubtful but then agreed. We should base our ideas on New Testament days and not as he (Bucer) had been doing on the situation in the days of the prophets in the Old Testament.

By 1532 the city council set up in Strasbourg a board of Kirchenpfleger comprising 21, 3 from each of the 7 parishes reminiscent of Oecolampadius' council in structure. The Kirchenpfleger were to supervise the preaching of the pastors and to meet with the Kircherkonvent for the good of the Church in general. 'The idea of discipline definitely becomes real with the creation of the Kirchenpfleger in Strasbourg'.⁵⁵

The 1533 Synod establishing the 'Strasbourg Ordinances' was a landmark in this developing discipline. Some measures are particularly noteworthy.

1. Believers were to be invited to the Lord's Table.
2. The Kirchenpfleger nominated by the State were invested with ecclesiastical authority; now they were Church officials,

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J. Courvoisier, *La Notion d'Eglise Chez Bucer* (Paris, 1933), 26.

‘geistliche Personen’ where formerly they were simply described as laymen.

3. 1 Cor. 14 and other New Testament texts are quoted which identify, the Kirchenpfleger with the elders of the primitive Church. They are of divine origin, willed by the Holy Spirit.

This identification with the New Testament elder marks a vital stage in the process of Bucer’s thought.⁵⁶ His views on the eldership are further amplified in his tract dated 1533/34 ‘Quid de baptisate’. Elders are described as those ‘who would apply themselves with us to govern the Church and would set up and administer all that had to do with holy admonition and censure’.⁵⁷ For this were needed laymen ‘courageux - comprehensifs - pieux - intelligents - ayant l’experience’.⁵⁸ 1 Cor. 12 was quoted and, in an important analogical allusion incorporating 1 Tim. 5:17, it was maintained that just as the Jews had priests, scribes and also leaders of the people so it was certain that the elders whom St. Paul named were not all teachers. As far as the establishment of the Kirchenpfleger as an ecclesiastical council independent of secular influence was concerned, however, this was a process which met with much opposition and Bucer’s success in Strasbourg was piecemeal as was Calvin’s in Geneva. But the progress of thought is significant at this point, particularly the identification with the New Testament elder.

Bucer’s commentary on the Gospels (1536) extended his discussion on discipline in general. Elders were especially charged with carrying out discipline. Confession might be made before them though the

⁵⁶ J. M. Barkley, *The Eldership in Irish Presbyterianism* (1963), 10. R.N. Caswell, ‘The Theory and Practice of Calvin’s Church Discipline’ (Ph.D Thesis, Queen’s University Belfast, 1960), 152.

W. Pauck, *The Heritage of the Reformation* (Oxford University Press, 1968, 2 and *passim*.

G.Hamman, *Entre la secte et la cité: le Projet d’Eglise du Reformateur Martin Bucer (1491-1551)* (Geneva, 1984), 286 and *passim*.

⁵⁷ Cited from ‘Quid de Baptisate’ in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 11.

⁵⁸ Cited from ‘Quid de Baptisate’ in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 11.

private form was not excluded. In the third edition, however, there was a modification reserving discipline chiefly to ministers.

Bucer's 'De Vera Animarum Cura' (1538), a treatise on pastoral care, is more significant for our purpose.⁵⁹ It claimed that it was the duty of all Christians to exercise pastoral care but particularly those 'who are specially ordained for the care of souls and the healing of sinners'. Paul's Corinthian correspondence is quoted to show that punishment was imposed by many and in the name of the Church. Paul caused it but the elders of the Church administered it (*Presbyteri autem Ecclesiae Corinthiciae administrabant*). The value of this example for us is in showing how the Church will admonish and castigate such through elders, I Tim. 5 being quoted. In discipline however, the magistrate was also deemed responsible (*omnino enim haec partes sunt magistratuum*). The importance of the New Testament elder within the disciplinary function of the Church is again noteworthy. The partial success of Bucer's disciplinary efforts on the ground is evident from later developments. By 1546 discipline was only effective among restricted groups, churches within churches, (*Gemeinschaften*) composed of those willing to submit to discipline. This marks the beginning of the 'Ecclesiola' within the 'Ecclesia', characteristic of some later developments within reformed churches. The *Kirchenpfleger* were invited to attend these fellowships. Offenders were invited to absent themselves. Bucer attempted to establish independent ecclesiastical discipline in Hesse. Elders were elevated to an essential place. Excommunication was only to take place with the approval of the 'superintendents'. But again the practicalities were such that in the event discipline was carried out by both elders and magistrates. The battle between secular and ecclesiastical continued.

Bucer's mature view on Church polity and the eldership are evident in his 'De Regno Christi' addressed to Edward VI, 'written in 1550'.⁶⁰ There were four lists of offices in Bucer's view of ministry:

⁵⁹ 'De Vera Animarum Cura', in *Scripta Anglicana* (Basle, 1577), 293-353.

⁶⁰ In *Melanchthon and Bucer*, edited by W. Pauck (London, 1969), 174-394.

1. Pastors for preaching the Word, administration of sacraments and cure of souls.
2. Teachers or Doctors including school teachers and Professors of theology.
3. Elders for the government of the Church and discipline.
4. Deacons for the care of poor and administration.

In 'De Regno Christi' Bucer referred to the presiding elder as bishop. He recognized two ranks of elders and bemoaned the fact that St. Ambrose testified to the existence and abolition of this office of elders who along with the minister were responsible for discipline in the Church and that their disappearance had harmful effects. For both Strasbourg and England Bucer envisaged offices of preaching and teaching elders trained for their tasks; untrained lay elders who, together with the older ministers, would be responsible for the administration of discipline; and deacons who would be in charge of poor relief and the administration of benevolences.⁶¹

The following excerpt from 'De Regno Christi' indicated his views, speaking of New Testament elders Bucer continued:-

Here however, it must be observed that it is not necessary for all elders to be trained in letters and languages, or even in the ability of public teaching. This office, although it is also that of elders, pertains especially to the one who holds the first place among the elders, to whom the name of bishop is uniquely given ---Saint Ambrose testifies that there was this kind of elder both in the synagogue and in the early Church and that this office was abolished not without a vitiation of doctrine and disadvantage to the Churches. Commenting on the first part of the fifth chapter of the first letter to Timothy he writes: 'Do not slander an elder'. Hence both the synagogue and afterward the Church had elders without whose counsel nothing was done in the Church. What negligence abolished this I do not know, unless perhaps the

scorn of teachers, or more likely their pride, when they wanted only themselves to seem to be something.⁶²

John Calvin

The influence of Martin Bucer on John Calvin is generally agreed to be substantial. It is particularly evident in the sphere of ideas on Church discipline and polity. It is perhaps best seen as we compare Calvin's views on these matters before, during and after his years spent with Bucer in Strasbourg 1538-1541.

Calvin's Genevan Confession (1536), Catechism (1537) and Genevan Articles (1537) all recognized the need for discipline expressed in terms of excommunication. In the 1536 Institutes excommunication was mentioned, three aims of discipline noted and Christ's reference to the 'keys' related both to discipline and preaching.⁶³ The section on discipline in the 1539 Institutes was again quite small. The necessity of the three aims was dealt with more fully. The 'keys' were referred to again in this double sense of discipline and preaching but there is little positive direction given.

The Genevan Articles (Ordonnances) of 1537 referred specifically to the concept of eldership. 'We have deliberately required of you to be pleased to ordain and elect certain persons of good life and witness from among the faithful in all the quarters of the city', having oversight of the life and government of each of them.'⁶⁴ Part of the work of these 'persons' was reporting cases of indiscipline or immorality to the minister.

By the time Calvin came to Strasbourg in 1538 his views on discipline were at least basically formed. The 'keys', admonition and exclusion from the sacraments were the major aspect of his thinking. It is difficult to assess the source of his views. Certainly Scripture

⁶² W. Pauck, *op. cit.*, 231-232

⁶³ In this and the following, development in Calvin's thought as expressed in the Institutes may be determined from the annotated account with dating in the margin of the appropriate volume of Calvin, *Institution de la Religion Chrestienne* by D. Benoit (Paris, 1961).

⁶⁴ K. S. Reid, *Calvin's Theological Treatises* (London, 1954), 52.

played a prominent part. Calvin's knowledge of the Fathers was quite detailed so this must not be excluded, nor indeed the influence of other reformers such as Oecolampadius and Bucer either directly or indirectly.

When Calvin and Bucer came together in Strasbourg in 1538 they certainly had both experienced the frustrating problem of seeking to establish an independent ecclesiastical discipline in Geneva and Strasbourg with only indifferent success. Calvin's years in Strasbourg were most formative. He shared Bucer's views on discipline and along with Bucer sought to implement it while he was there. But Calvin complained of the piecemeal nature of its implementation and that it was by no means purely ecclesiastical.

The massive nature of the influence both of Bucer and of these years in Strasbourg on Calvin can be seen after his return to Geneva in 1541.⁶⁵ It was above all obvious in the following aspects of Calvin's thinking:-

1. Calvin's organisation in Geneva of the Consistory, the soul of his system, was based on Bucer's Kirchenpfleger and Kirchenkonvent. Calvin's Congregation (Compagnie de pasteurs) corresponded exactly to Bucer's Kirchenkonvent. There is no definite trace of these organisations during his first stay.

2. Calvin's Genevan Ordonnances of 1541 began with a recital of Bucer's list of four offices; Pastors, Teachers, Elders and Deacons. In particular, they described these offices as 'instituted by our Lord'. There was, then, a significant difference between the 'certain persons' Calvin asked for in 1537 in Geneva and the 'anciens' he required on his return. Courvoisier stresses the contrast in these terms. 'In 1537, it was Calvin's own idea, in 1541 it is the ordinance of our Lord, a divine institution! In 1537 the necessity of discipline is indicated; in 1541 only the word "elder" appears.'⁶⁶ This vitally affected Calvin's view of the authority on which these men

⁶⁵ J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 11f.
R.N. Caswell, *op. cit.*, 144-173.
W. Pauck, *op. cit.*, 85-99.

⁶⁶ J Courvoisier, 'Bucer et l'oeuvre de Calvin', *Revue de Theologie et Philosophie* Jan-Mar 1933, 69.

would be appointed. As Courvoisier notes, 'Before 1538 the men that he is speaking of are laymen, now they are considered as members of the clergy, their ministry and their authority given directly by God with the same warrant as preachers. It is an exact parallel to the idea introduced by Bucer in the Strasbourg ordinances of 1533-34, when he identified the "Kirchenpfleger" with the elders of the primitive Church'.⁶⁷ As the Genevan Ordonnances stated, 'It has seemed well advised to us that the spiritual government, such as our Lord showed and instituted in His Word should be set out in a suitable form so that it can take place and be observed in our midst'.⁶⁸ Elders had a place in the spiritual government of the Church for theirs was an appointment 'iure divino'. Both this and the equation with the New Testament elder is highly significant in the progress of the development of the thinking of both Bucer and Calvin.

3. Calvin reflects a persuasion concerning the visibility of the Church after his time in Strasbourg not in evidence to the same degree prior to it.

4. Generally in terms of discipline, Bucer's influence on Calvin can be seen in the way very large parts of the 'De Vera Animarum Cura' found their way into the Institutes of 1539 and 1542, the evident link between discipline and the Lord's Table and Calvin's subsequent attempt to realize Bucer's ideal of *ecclesiastical* discipline.

Indeed, as we consider references to discipline in general and to the eldership in particular in the Institutes of 1536 and 1539 together with his commentary on Romans at 12:8 (1536) and compare these with similar references in the later versions of the Institutes and Calvin's later commentaries, the significance of Bucer's influence is yet more pervasive. Perhaps, in this light, Calvin's position might not be as 'clearly ambiguous' as suggested. Is there a line of development here within Bucer and Calvin which stresses the rationale of the progression of thought and gives consistency even amid certain ambiguity?

⁶⁷ J. Courvoisier, *La Notion*, 143

⁶⁸ Cited from the Genevan Ordinances in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 1-13.

As we have noted, the Institutes of 1536 and 1539 give some detail in discipline. It is only with the editions 1543/45 however that the features familiar to modern readers occur. In the relevant section on the Officers of the Church (Book IV Chapter 111, paras 8 and 9) the only references dating back to 1536 and 1539 are to the work of the diaconate and its origin. Those portions dealing with the eldership (Rom. 12:7, 8; I Cor. 12:28) are all dated 1541 and 1545.

Similarly, the reference to elders in Calvin's commentary at Rom. 12:8 (1536) is certainly significant when compared with later data in his commentaries.

Although he properly calls those *rulers* to whom the ministration of the Church was committed (and they were Seniors, who ruled and governed others, and exercised the censure of manners), yet that which he saith of them may generally be applied to all kinds of superiors; for it is no small care (that) is required of those who are to provide for the safety of all, neither is a slender diligence looked for of them who ought to watch night and day for the health of all men; although the estate of that time showeth that Paul did not speak of all superiors (because then there were no godly magistrates), but of Seniors (elders), who were the correctors of manners'.⁶⁹

Calvin's references to the eldership in the Institutes occur at two major points under the 'Officers of the Church' (Book IV Chapter III para 8) and under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church' (Book IV Chapter XI para 1).

In the former, having equated the New Testament titles of bishops, presbyters and pastors and related these to the ministry of the Word, Calvin goes on to note other offices as indicated at Rom. 12:7; I Cor. 12:28.

But in the Epistle to the Romans, and the First Epistle to the Corinthians, he enumerates other offices as powers, gifts of healing, interpretations, government, care of poor (Rom.

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J Calvin, *Commentary upon The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Romans* (Edinburgh, 1844), 351.

12:7; I Cor. 12:28). As to those which were temporary I say nothing for it is not worth while to dwell upon them. But there are two of perpetual duration-.viz ---government and care of the poor. By these governors I understand seniors selected from the people to unite with the bishops in pronouncing censures and exercising discipline. For this is the only meaning which can be given to the passage 'He that ruleth with diligence' (Rom. 12:8). From the beginning, therefore, each Church had its senate composed of pious grave and venerable men in whom was lodged the power of correcting faults. Of this power we shall afterwards speak. Moreover, experience shows that this arrangement was not confined to one age, and therefore we are to regard the office of government as necessary for all ages.⁷⁰

It is to be noted that this office is distinguished from that of bishop/presbyter/pastor and from the ministry of the Word. It is also pertinent to note the texts are confined to Rom. 12:7,8; 1 Cor. 12:28. This section is dated 1541 and 1545.

Under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church' Calvin stresses the necessity for spiritual government in the Church.

To this end, there were established in the Church from the first, tribunals which might take cognizance of morals, animadvert on vices and exercise the office of the keys. This order is mentioned by Paul in the First Epistle to the Corinthians under the name of governments (I Cor. 12:28); in like manner, in the Epistle to the Romans, when he says 'He that ruleth with diligence' (Rom. 12:8). For he is not addressing magistrates, none of whom were then Christians, but those who were joined with pastors in the spiritual government of the Church. In the Epistle to Timothy, also, he mentions two kinds of presbyters, some who labour in the word and others who do not perform the office of preaching but rule well (I Tim. 5:17). By this latter class there is no

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J Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter III, para. 8.

doubt he means those who were appointed to the inspection of manners and 'the whole use of the keys'.⁷¹

It is interesting to note the same use of texts (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28), the development of the power of the keys in this connection, the stress in spiritual office and the reference to 'two kinds of presbyters' citing 1 Timothy 5:17, while maintaining the distinction relating to the ministry of the Word. This portion is dated 1545.

A similar progression of thought is evident as we examine the relevant points in Calvin's commentaries dated after his visit to Strasbourg.

For example, in 1 Corinthians dated 1546 Calvin comments on 5:4.

As, however, a multitude never accomplishes anything with moderation or seriousness if not governed by counsel, there was appointed in the ancient Church a Presbytery, that is, an assembly of elders, who, by the consent of all, had the power of first judging the case'.⁷²

Later at 12:28 there is a clear reference to two kinds of presbyters and 1 Tim. 5:17 is alluded to.

'By *Governments* I understand *Elders*, who had the charge of discipline. For the primitive Church had its Senate, for the purpose of keeping the people in propriety of deportment, as Paul shows elsewhere when he makes mention of two kinds of Presbyters. (1 Tim. 5:17) ("Deux ordres de Prestress: c'est à dire d'Anciens"- "Two kinds of Presbyters; that is to say, Elders"). Hence *government* consisted of those Presbyters who excelled others in gravity, experience and authority'.⁷³

Calvin's commentary on 1 Timothy was published in 1548. The comment on 5:17 is yet more revealing.

We may learn from this, that there were at that time two kinds of elders; for all were not ordained to teach. The words

⁷¹ J. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, X, 1.

⁷² J Calvin. *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1848), 183.

⁷³ Calvin, *Commentary on First Corinthians*, 417.

plainly mean, that there were some who 'ruled well' and honourably, but who did not hold the office of teachers. And, indeed, there were chosen from among the people men of worth and good character, who, united with the pastors in a common council and authority, administered the discipline of the Church, and were a kind of censors for the correction of morals. Ambrose complains that this custom had gone into disuse, through the carelessness, or rather through the pride, of the doctors, who wish to possess undivided power.⁷⁴

In 1561, in a sermon on 1 Tim. 5:17, Calvin also refers to this distinction between teaching and ruling functions claiming that one could not change what God had commanded as something inviolable. It is only fair to note, however, that Calvin alludes here to 'some who "ruled well" and honourably, but who did not hold the office of teachers'. This distinguishes the office of teacher from that of elder. Thus the 'ambiguity' arises. It is always difficult to estimate with precision how far Calvin understood the pastor/ teacher as a distinct office assisted by the elders or how far he perceived a presbyterial office with dual functions of teaching and ruling.

Calvin's Commentary on Acts, part 1 (chapters 1-13) was published in 1552 and part 2 (chapters 1~28) in 1554. Commenting on elders therein it is clear that he regards the elders as appointed along with the apostles for the government of the Church, the former regarded as a local on-going and necessary form of ministry, the latter as extraordinary in their appointment. The deacons with whom Calvin equates the Seven appointed in Acts 6 were under the jurisdiction of

⁷⁴ Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistles to Timothy, Titus and Philemon* (Edinburgh, 1856), 138-9.

For an extended discussion on various interpretations of 1 Tim. 5:17 see R. N. Caswell, *op. cit.*, esp. 221-30 and for a recent discussion on the issue see G. W. Knight, III, 'Two Offices (Elders/Bishops and Deacons) and Two Orders of Elders (Preaching/Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders): A New Testament Study' in *Presbyterian Covenant Siminary Review*, Vol. IX Spring 1985, Number 1 and R. S. Rayburn, 'Three Offices: Minister, Elder, Deacon in *Presbyterian Covenant Seminary Review*', XII Fall 1986, Number 2.

the elders. The elders referred to in Acts 14:23 he takes as teachers or pastors though he recognises at that point other elders whose work is the custody of morality within the Church. All of this confirms the mature expression of his views noted already in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy.

Comparing references both in the earlier versions of the Institutes and Calvin's commentaries with those later and taking Calvin's residence in Strasbourg (1538-41) as the dividing line certain important indications emerge: -

1. The office is much more clearly defined. Earlier the references are to seniors who are correctors of manners. Later, they are quite clearly elders, who assist pastors in the oversight of the Church.

2. The duties of this office became much more clearly integrated within the context of Church government. As early forms of government had the Senate, so the Church has the Presbytery without whose consent nothing might be done.- The developed structures of Calvin's comments on Acts make this evident.

3. The link with the early Church is perforce a link with Scripture and its authority. The polity is gradually traced to biblical norms. This is paralleled in the Genevan Ordinances when they describe the 'spiritual government' of which elders formed one of the four orders as being 'such as our Lord showed and instituted by His Word should be set out in a suitable form so that it can take place and be observed in our midst'.⁷⁵

4. There are two kinds of presbyters, those who teach and those who rule. This is stated and the reference in Calvin's sermon on 1 Tim. 5:17 in 1561 adds the *imprimatur* of scriptural permanence to this view. This fact has far-reaching implications in considering the equation of elder and presbyter. While Bucer and Calvin seemed to reserve the title bishop for the presiding elder, they obviously viewed the New Testament elder as one of two kinds of New Testament presbyter.

This not only evinces clear lines of development in Calvin's thought but confirms the view that Bucer's influence on his thought was of

⁷⁵ Cited from Genevan Ordinances in J. M. Barkley, op. cit. 12-13.

paramount importance and that, indeed, what we have here is the developing progression of a Bucer-Calvin concept of eldership. The fact that Calvin's allusion to Ambrose in his comment on 1 Tim. 5:17 is little more than a transcript and almost a verbatim one at that of Bucer's view expressed on the subject in 'De Regno Christi' bears this out.

Having briefly reviewed this Bucer-Calvin developing theme on the eldership, we must now attempt to assess its significance. Certain features about it call for comment. First, it was a developing progression of thought which was quite clearly evident. This arises naturally from the historical drift of thought during these years in the two reformers' views. The paucity and relative imprecision of earlier allusions stand in stark contrast with the much fuller and more defined assertions of later data. The move from Old Testament to New Testament context of discipline within Bucer and that from 'certain men' to 'anciens' within Calvin confirms this. There is also, in both men, an increasing sense of the importance of this office within the polity and government of the Church. Compounded with this progression is the plain and widely accepted influence which Bucer exerted over Calvin. It is an influence perhaps most clearly discernible in reference to Church polity and the eldership. It would, in a word, be difficult to read the story of this period even from a purely historical point of view and escape this evident progression.

At the same time our perception of the progression might require some qualification from the historical point of view. If we presume that Bucer and Calvin started historically with quite distinct offices of pastor/teacher and elder, it would be reasonable to assume that this separation would have been yet more clear in their understanding at the point of its inception into their respective schemes of discipline. The real difficulty is that we cannot with any degree of accuracy know more of their thinking at source on the matter. It might prove helpful to examine the source with reference to Zurich and to pay even greater attention to the influence of specific local historical circumstances as, for example, in Strasbourg and Geneva on this source at its earliest appearance.

Secondly, it was also a definite progression of thought. This appears from two considerations particularly. A comparison of Bucer's

Strasbourg Ordinances of 1533 with Calvin's Genevan Ordinances of 1541 reveals that each marks a decisive point in the reformers' considerations. At those points each, having reached the conviction that Church government in general should be based on the Scriptures, affirmed that the eldership in particular should be regarded as a divine institution ordained by Christ, a spiritual office. The concurrence of their views is remarkable as Courvoisier notes, 'an exact parallel'.⁷⁶ The other consideration is the way in which both reformers came expressly to aver their belief that the New Testament at 1 Tim. 5:17 portrayed two kinds of elders, ruling and teaching in function. Again, the close resemblance of Calvin's comments on 1 Tim. 5:17 with Bucer's in 'De Regno Christi' as already noted makes this equally remarkable.

Thirdly, it was a conscious progression of thought. They did not come to these conclusions casually but as a result of considered opinion. The nub of the matter is, of course, whether they reached these convictions motivated by the practicalities of the situation, the need for discipline, the need to establish ecclesiastical as over against secular discipline within the Church, and simply went to the Scriptures to 'justify' an institution which they found in the 4/5th century Church and which was particularly suited to their situation or whether their approach was of a different nature.

Such a judgment as the former would be quite sweeping. They were men who, along with all the reformers, recognised the decisive importance of Scripture. Bucer and Calvin in particular had a detailed knowledge of Scripture and of the Church Fathers as well as of Church history. Even if they did move from the practicalities of their situation via Church history to the Scriptures this was a frequent and viable path taken by the Reformers and not in itself *ultra vires*.

J.M. Barkley commenting on this general problem claims:-

The Reformation was not an age of inventions, but an age of rediscovery, and from biblical and patristic evidence Bucer and Calvin re-discovered the eldership. At the same time, it

was the necessity of the times which led to this re-discovery'.⁷⁷

This is surely an accurate assessment of the situation. Two considerations certainly support it. Both Bucer and Calvin following Oecolampadius quite consciously rejected the expressed view of other reformers that, now secular rulers were Christian and had 'kissed the Son', there was not the same need to exclude them from authority in the Church. Authority within the Church could come from both elder and magistrate. Bucer and Calvin claimed that the Church ought to be governed *qua* Church by its elders as appointed *jure divino*. The second consideration is that there were those even at the time, Zwingli and Melanchthon, for example, who viewed 1 Tim. 5:17 differently. Both Zwingli and Melanchthon claimed that Scripture knew of no other presbyters or priests than those who preach the Word of God nor was it possible to prove it otherwise.⁷⁸ It was, then, not casually nor in any fresh innovative sense but rather in rediscovering Scripture truth on the matter that Bucer and Calvin opposed such a view in favour of a two-presbyter theory. However controverted this theory became in the later history of the Church it must be seen to exist quite clearly in Bucer and Calvin and to appear as a consciously expressed view in awareness of contrary opinion. This brings us back to the point from which we began. in the light of these considerations, we must now look again at some of the questions raised and comments made by Professor Torrance on the subject.

With regard to the reformers' motives in formulating their views on the eldership would it be fair to say that they did not simply import their views from Church history and then seek biblical justification for them but rather re-discovered and developed them from Scripture under the most pressing practical circumstances? There can be no doubt about the pressing need to establish discipline in the Church and that on a purely ecclesiastical basis. There is clear evidence also

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J Barkley, *op. cit.*, 14.

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U.Zwingli, *Omnia Opera* ((Tiguri), 1581), 1. 106. P. Melanchthon, *Opera* (Wittenberg, 1563), Vol. IV (ed. Peucher), 420.

as to how far this impinged on the reformers' considerations and thinking. There can be no doubt, on the other hand, about the precedents not only from Scripture but from the Church Fathers, the early history of the Christian Church even down to the Waldenses in the twelfth and the Bohemian Church in the fifteenth century for the institution of the eldership. On this evidence alone, the assumption that Bucer and Calvin 'invented' the eldership can be set aside. It is particularly the progression of thought, with all its varied motivation, continuing through Bucer and Calvin which seems to make 're-discovery' rather than simply 'justification' the tone of their thinking. The on-going nature of this development on the background of their great learning at least makes this a viable interpretation of the evidence.

What of the 'ambiguity' in Calvin on the whole subject of the eldership? Without doubt different strands of approach are evident in Calvin's opinions. Dealing precisely with Church 'governors' in the Institutes, he only quotes Rom. 12:7,8 and 1 Cor. 12:28, and there he stresses the distinction between such governors and the bishop/presbyter/pastor in his ministry of the Word. In the 'Jurisdiction of the Church', later in the Institutes, however, he does extend these texts to incorporate 1 Tim. 5:17, mentions two kinds of presbyters and elaborates this view in his commentaries on 1 Cor. and 1 Tim. and in preaching on 1 Tim. 5:17. The fact that he limits his textual warranty to Rom. 12:7,8 and 1 Cor. 12:28 in portraying among offices 'governors' or 'seniors' is not an insuperable barrier. Could it be again that we are seeing this expanding progression of thought developing as within the Institutes under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church' and in his commentaries and preaching he expresses further reflection on the biblical offices by including 1 Tim. 5:17 in his discussion? It is not without significance that in the section under the 'Jurisdiction of the Church', Rom. 12:8 and 1 Cor. 12:28 are mentioned as well as 1 Tim. 5:17 and that references in his commentary on Acts while maintaining a distinction between pastor and elder in the sense of governor do at least tentatively recognise the concept of two kinds of elder.

What of the further ambiguity in Calvin's reluctance to admit elders to the Presbytery or to join with ministers in acts of ordination by

laying on of hands? Is this perhaps partly explicable on the general ground that constantly for Bucer and Calvin the practicalities of the situation limited implementation of their views? It seems also clear, however, that both Calvin and Bucer, in whatever way they espoused the two-presbytery theory, reserved the title 'bishop' for the presiding/preaching presbyter. The distinction between teaching and ruling function, if not expressed overtly in a two-presbyter theory, was at least evident in this way.

What of the 'Presbyter theory' itself, however, in Bucer and Calvin? Professor Torrance comments that as a result of later investigation 'Reformed scholars found themselves forced more and more to the conclusion that there is no clear evidence in the New Testament for what we call "elders", let alone the theory that there are two kinds of presbyter'.⁷⁹ This statement arises from an assessment of our reformed concept of eldership as historically orientated and in the light of much subsequent debate on the subject. It nonetheless seems reasonable to maintain that, however differently later Reformed scholars viewed the data, certainly with Bucer and Calvin there was a clear progression of thought moving in the direction of what later became known as the 'presbyter theory'.

While admitting the weakness in the evidence from extant documentation for the equation of presbyter with elder, the pressured motivation which formed the background of the reformers' view, and a degree of ambiguity and fluidity in their opinions, Bucer and Calvin nevertheless evince a progression of thought toward the 'presbyter theory'. The logical premises of their convictions were at the very least the recognition of a duality of function in teaching and ruling, within the New Testament presbyterate. The logical deduction of their reasoning is well couched in the unsuccessful bid of the Scottish Commissioners to the Westminster Assembly to have these views embodied in Presbyterian polity:

Besides those presbyters which rule well, and labour in the word and doctrine, there be other presbyters, who especially

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T. F. Torrance, *op. cit.* 7.

apply themselves to ruling, though they do not labour in the word and doctrine.⁸⁰

The whole scene, however, has been garbled by the extremism of later debate. It took three weeks to reach a conclusion in the Westminster Assembly even for a start! This must not prevent us from continuing to discuss and reassess the reasonably clear if tentative positions held by Bucer and Calvin in the formative stages of reformed thinking on the eldership and the honest if heated differences which arose at the time of the Reformation and later. Only then will we enter the twenty-first century with views on Church polity reflecting a true and biblical, if somewhat divided, ecumenism.

R.E.H.Uprichard.

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Cited from the proceedings of the Westminster Assembly in J. M. Barkley, *op. cit.*, 19.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD IN RECONCILIATION WITH KARL BARTH AS GUIDE

Rev. Victor Sinclair

Introduction

God is sovereign. That means that he makes his own plans and carries them out in his own time and way. To state it otherwise, this is simply an expression of supreme intelligence, power, wisdom and love. This in turn means that God's will is not arbitrary, but acts in complete harmony with his character.

The eternal and absolute sovereignty of God was an integral part of the Jewish Faith and T.W. Manson briefly summarised the doctrine:

At the beginning it is national: in the end there is no limitation from without, and any self-limitation which there may be is only for the time being. That is, the purpose of God is what gives meaning to the world and to the life of man; and this purpose is conceived as wide enough to include the possibility and the actuality of wills hostile to it, without ceasing to be in its entirety the purpose of God. A rule of God, spiritual, world-wide and all comprehensive.⁸¹

This revelation of the sovereignty of God we find in its fullness in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. According to Manson,

the sovereignty of God is essentially the working out, to a pre-determined and inevitable end, of God's holy purpose,.....Its motive is love, its means service, and its end a state of things where the will of God is done on earth as in heaven.⁸²

The sovereignty of God is thus the active divine resolve which cannot remain in the sphere of thought but demands action. Here is the basis and purpose and execution of the plan of salvation. In the language of the New Testament, God,

having made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he has purposed in himself, that

⁸¹ T.W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, Cambridge, 1951, p.158

⁸² *Ibid*, p.170

in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth, even in him.⁸³

Karl Barth understands God to be the one who reveals himself as sovereign and operative in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. The sovereignty of God is essentially the freedom of God. But it is not a naked sovereignty nor a limited freedom. It does not mean an absolute, arbitrary power of disposal which is inconsistent with the nature of God. Nor can man as creature set limits upon God. God, however, is free to limit himself. He can reveal himself or he can conceal himself. God is free to become incarnate and to perform his work in the shape of miracle. He is free to be provoked and rejected, to be merciful and to bless and to make alive. The full range of the freedom of God must be allowed.

His presence in the life and being of the world is his personal and therefore actual presence expressed according to his sovereign decisions. This is how he meets us in Jesus Christ. His revelation in Jesus Christ embraces all these apparently so diverse and contradictory possibilities. They are all his possibilities. If we deny any one of them, we are denying Jesus Christ and God himself. Instead of recognising and adoring God, we are setting up an idol. For we are imposing upon him - in defiance of the freedom which he has actually proved to us - a bondage which can be only that of our own self-will that would like to deny God and put itself in the place of God.⁸⁴

The mystery and majesty of revelation and reconciliation in Jesus Christ is that in giving himself in love and grace to man God does not give up or lose his sovereignty.

⁸³ *Ephesians* 1:9,10

⁸⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* vols.1-14, E.T., Eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, Edinburgh, 1956-1975 (hereafter C.D.) 11/1, pp.314-315

A. The Gospel of Reconciliation

Man is the object of God's love and saving purpose, and the recipient of God's gracious will and action in Jesus Christ his son. Through the Holy Spirit he is lost in wonder, love and praise. According to Barth, this Gospel of reconciliation - of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ - has for its summary, the doctrine of election.

The doctrine of election is the sum of the Gospel because of all the words that can be said or heard it is the best: that God elects man: that God is for man too, the one who loves in freedom. It is grounded in the knowledge of Jesus Christ because he is both the electing God and elected man in one. It is part of the doctrine of God because originally God's election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of himself. Its function is to bear basic testimony to eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the works and ways of God.⁸⁵

The Election of Grace

It will be helpful and relevant to note the salient points of Barth's exposition which is a radical restatement and revision which is contrary to most traditional views. Herbert Hartwell writes,

Barth claims....that the thought of sinful man's reconciliation with God in Jesus Christ and of God's fellowship with sinful men, thereby made possible for him and for men, was in the mind of God before the world and men were created and thus even before sin became a reality. The unparalleled precedence thereby given to the idea of reconciliation over creation and sin has to be seen in the light of Barth's teaching on creation..... the Nihil and reconciliation.....before its true meaning can be grasped.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ C.D., 11/2, p.3

⁸⁶ H. Hartwell, *The Theology of Karl Barth : An Introduction* London, 1964,p.109

Barth is concerned not to create some abstract necessity of universal acceptance to correspond to the divine sovereignty of electing grace. He writes,

The proposition from which we must start is that in the determination of the rejected we have to do with the will of God in what is by definition a wholly different sense, than in the determination of the elect. The one will of God which determines both is here the almighty, holy and compassionate non-willing of God. No eternal covenant of wrath corresponds on the one side to the eternal covenant of grace on the other.⁸⁷

Barth's whole argument is based on the fact that Jesus Christ is electing God and elected man. As the elected man he is the reality and revelation of the will of God on behalf of an unlimited number of other men. He is elected to bear their rejection, but also to overcome and therefore, to be for them the promise and proclamation of their own election in time.

If we cannot simply say for all, but can only speak of an unlimited many, this is not because of any weakness of limitation of the revealed divine will in Jesus Christ. This will of God, as is continually and rightly said in harmony with I Timothy 2:4 is directed to the salvation of all men in intention, and sufficient for the salvation of all men in power..... When we remember this, we cannot follow the classical doctrine and make the open number of those who are elect in Jesus Christ into a closed number to which all other men are opposed as if they were rejected. Such an assumption is shattered by the unit of the real and revealed will of God in Jesus Christ.... This means however that the intention and power of God in relation to the whole world and all men are always his intention and power - an intention and power which we cannot control and the limits of which we cannot arbitrarily restrict or enlarge. It is always the concern of God to decide what is the world and the human totality for which the man Jesus Christ is elected, and which

⁸⁷ C.D., 11/2, p.450

is itself elected in and with him....We cannot consider their number as closed, for we can never find any reason for such a limitation in Jesus Christ. As the reality and revelation of the omnipotent loving-kindness of God, he is not dead, but lives and reigns to all eternity. This event in and for the world, and therefore its movement and direction at any given moment, its dimension and the number of those whom the event affects at any moment, are all matters of his sovereign control. For the very same reason, however, we cannot equate their number with the totality of all men.⁸⁸

All of this is penetrating and helpful and while it could be argued that it leads to the teaching of universal salvation, Barth stops short of such a position. He rejects the logical reasoning, and at times, speculating of the human mind, even the 'mind' of men of faith, and prefers to leave the issue to rest in the 'divine logic' and freedom, the sovereign freedom of the divine grace in Jesus Christ. C.K. Barrett has some very helpful comments, including a quotation from Barth himself, on this important subject. He states:

The history and personal make up of the Church are not due to chance or to arbitrary human choices, but represent the working out of God's plan. Only here can peace and security be found. Our own intentions, like our own virtues, are far too insecure to stand the tests of time and judgementPredestination is the most comfortable of all Christian doctrines, if men will accept it in its biblical form, and not attempt to pry into it with questions which it does not set out to answer. It is not a 'quantitative limitation of God's action, but it is a qualitative definition', the final statement of the truth that justification, and, in the end, salvation also, are by the grace above, and through faith alone.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp.421-422

⁸⁹ C.K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans* A & C Black, London, 1962, 1971 pp.179-171

B. The Sovereignty of God in Reconciliation

The sovereignty of God in reconciliation is to be recognised and distinguished in the fact of God becoming man in Jesus Christ, i.e. the incarnation, a sovereignty in 'flesh'. In the fact also, of God in Jesus Christ bearing man's sin and bearing it away, i.e. the atonement, a sovereignty in 'death'. And again, in the fact of God blessing man with light and life, i.e. the resurrection and triumph of Jesus Christ, a sovereignty, in communication.

(a) The Man Christ Jesus

Barth states it thus :

The Christian theological tradition has always been in agreement that the statement ' the Word was made flesh' is not to be thought of as describing an event which overtook him, and therefore overtook God himself, but rather a free divine activity, a sovereign act of divine lordship, an act of mercy which was necessary only by virtue of the will of God himself.⁹⁰

And again,

It is his sovereign grace that he wills to be and is amongst us in humility, our God, God for us.⁹¹

The atonement made in Jesus Christ will be seen to be wholly an act of the grace of God and therefore an act of sovereignty which cannot be understood in all its profundity except from the fact that God is this God and a God of this kind.⁹²

Finally,

this intrinsically perfect and unsurpassable action has a distinct character....It's donation sovereignly precedes all reception on our part in the fact that in itself it is not merely real but true, the truth, and that as such it is not dark and dumb but perspicuous and vocal, that it may and will therefore be received, but is independent of our actual reception, being the sovereign basis of all reception and

⁹⁰ C.D., IV/3, I, p.179

⁹¹ Ibid, p.193

⁹² Ibid, p.80

therefore conditioning our reception but not conditioned by it.⁹³

Barth regarded the incarnation as that which is impossible for men to know and grasp by themselves. He called it 'the mystery of revelation.'⁹⁴ In summary definition he stated it thus:

it consists in the fact that the eternal Word of God chose, sanctified, and assumed human nature and existence into oneness with himself, in order thus, as very God and very man, to become the word of reconciliation spoken by God to man. The sign of this mystery revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the miracle of his birth, that he was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.⁹⁵

For Barth, then, this revelation and gospel are part of the one historical Jesus. This means that,

the revelation of the incarnate Word will be thus manifest to us in its truth by its own cogency and agency and not by any capacity belonging to us.⁹⁶

An important perspective in the understanding and statement of Barth in this respect is noted by John Thompson who writes:

Barth continued to affirm strongly the truth of the incarnation, but its focus and the point from which it is understood is that of reconciliation centred in the cross and resurrection as the integrating factor in the being and work of Christ. It is from this point that the whole life of Christ is to be retrospectively viewed and evaluated.⁹⁷

(b) The Death of the Cross

It is clear from Barth's theology that in his understanding of the Christian gospel, election, incarnation and reconciliation are intimately and indissolubly related to one another. The purpose of

⁹³ C.D., IV/3, I, p.8

⁹⁴ C.D., I/2, p.122

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ J. Thompson, *Christ in Perspective*, St. Andrews Press, Edinburgh, 1978, p.24

⁹⁷ J. Thompson, 'On the Trinity' *Theology Beyond Christendom*, Ed. by John Thompson, Pickwick Publications, Pennsylvania, 1986, p.16

the incarnation is truly revealed in the atonement which is the heart of the gospel as it relates to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here we see the revelation of his glory which includes within itself our salvation. To quote Barth:

We can read it only from the fact in which the omnipotent mercy of God is exercised and effective and revealed, in which his own glory and our salvation meet, in which that which God does for himself, is also done for us.⁹⁸

Barth places strong emphasis upon the concept of vicariousness, the divine 'focus' in Jesus Christ. He elucidates from aspects of this substitution by Jesus Christ, viz. He is (1) the Judge, (2) who is judged in our place, undergoing the judgement we deserved; (3) whose judgement was in the death on the cross; (4) establishing the righteousness of God - the Judge, the Judging, and the Judgement are the justice of God.

(1) He is in our place as Judge

Man as sinful and arrogant in his foolish pride considers himself his own judge inevitably vindicating himself and pronouncing others guilty. In a striking phrase, Barth describes man as a 'pseudo-sovereign creature' who asserts his independence of God.⁹⁹ But Jesus Christ as Judge has thus displaced him - his is the true sovereignty of judgement. Hence we have been deposed and abased 'in the humiliating power of what took place in Jesus Christ.'¹⁰⁰ A new sense of liberation and hope are therefore opened up to man because God in Jesus Christ as Judge will deal with him in an infinitely more just way.

(2) He is judged in our place

Jesus Christ is pure, spotless and sinless yet in the mystery of divine mercy and righteousness he accepted the alienation and lostness of the sinful state of the world in order to establish real peace and genuinely reconcile it to himself. This means that (a) the fact of our sinnership is made known and inescapable. 'In that God acknowledges us as sinners in Jesus Christ, his truth is the guarantee

⁹⁸ *C.D.*, IV/I, p.214

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* p.231

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* p.233

that we are such.’¹⁰¹ Also (b) the fact of our forgiveness is assured. ‘We are now summoned - not in ourselves but in Him to see and acknowledge that by his taking our place - our sin is cancelled and forgiven....that the responsibility which we owe Him in this matter has been borne by Him. We do not believe in Jesus Christ if this is not our fully assured confidence.’¹⁰²

(3) He bears the judgement in our place - His passion

Barth notes four points about the passion of Jesus Christ:

(i) It is active - Jesus Christ as willing subject allowed himself to become the object of this suffering and death. ‘It is with a free self-offering of this kind and therefore with an act and not a fate that we have to do in this passion.’¹⁰³

(ii) It is historical - The action took place on earth, in time and space. ‘The Gospels....indicate a very definite point in world history.’¹⁰⁴

(iii) It is personal - The mystery of this passion has to do with who Jesus Christ is and what he has done ‘for us’ on the cross. ‘His person: It is the eternal God Himself who has given Himself in His Son to be man, and as man, to take upon Himself this human passion. His Mission: It is the Judge who in this passion takes the place of those who ought to be judged, who in this passion allows Himself to be judged in their place.’¹⁰⁵

(iv) It is unique - What is being fulfilled in this passion is the reconciliation of the world of God. ‘In this humiliation God is supremely God, that in this death He is supremely alive, that He has maintained and revealed His deity in the passion of this man as His eternal Son.....We are dealing with sin itself and as such: the preoccupation, the orientation, the determination of man as he has left his place as a creature and broken his covenant with God; the

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.240

¹⁰² Ibid, p.242

¹⁰³ Ibid, p.245

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.246

corruption which God has made His own, for which He willed to take responsibility in this one man....He has Himself borne the consequence of this separation to bear it away.¹⁰⁶

(4) He established the Righteousness of God

Barth underlines that what has been stated under (1), (2) and (3) is the positive act of God. The suffering and death of Jesus Christ are the NO of God in and with which He assents the sovereign determination of His YES to man. Jesus Christ in all of this does justly manifest the righteousness of God. This means that

As the Judge, as the Judged, as the One who is his own person has accomplished the judgement, He is the end of the old aeon and the beginning of the new.¹⁰⁷

Barth understands the atonement to mean the actual and complete reversal of the sin, the disobedience, the unrighteousness of man by Jesus Christ who as the Son of God was obedient to the Father in the fulfilment of this action of God, and became obedient into death, even the death of the cross.

In so doing He acted justly in the place of all end for the sake of all.....In so doing, in His own person, He reversed the fall in their place and for their sake.¹⁰⁸

Barth was well aware that no theory of the atonement can adequately and fully elucidate its deepest meaning, not least his own,

no doctrine of this central mystery can exhaustively and precisely grasp and express the extent to which God has intervened for us here. Do not confuse my theory of the reconciliation with the thing itself.¹⁰⁹

However, Barth insists that there is a real exchange, a true substitution, He took 'our place'

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 257

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.259

¹⁰⁹ K. Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, E.T. London, 1949, 1982, p.116

Pay attention to this for us: nothing must be deducted from it! Whatever a doctrine of reconciliation tries to express, it *must* say this.¹¹⁰

It is important to recognise that we cannot add anything to this four-fold work except the Amen of our acceptance. Moreover, this four-fold 'for us' is the veritable centre of the doctrine of reconciliation, and indeed, of all theology. Barth writes

If the nail of this four-fold 'for us' does not hold, everything else will be left hanging in the void as an anthropological or psychological or sociological myth, and sooner or later it will break and fall to the ground.¹¹¹

The cross of Jesus Christ is thus a finished work. His name is glorified and his saving power made known.

(c) The Lord of Glory

Inevitably, if the reconciliation between God and man, and man and God is complete, and that in an objective sense, how does this event become real and effective in the subjective experience of man? Barth supplies the answer in the fact of the resurrection which affords the true light of the knowledge and experience of God, and in the action and ministry of the Holy Spirit.

For Barth, the resurrection is a new and independent act of God declaring the verdict of the Father concerning the death of his son, Jesus Christ. For there is no such thing as atonement and reconciliation apart from the resurrection. In the event of the resurrection, related to the cross and continuous with it. God justified himself, his son and all mankind. The Easter event

with its manifestation and self-declaration....as the prophet, Witness and Preacher entered into the world, as the light of his Mediatorship, he is the living Jesus Christ,.....the light which shines in the world and can never be extinguished.¹¹²

The all embracing relevance of the resurrection then, its reconciling significance for us, is to be understood, as God's sovereign, free act of grace.

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ C.D., op.cit., p.273

¹¹² C.D., iv/3,1,p.291

Barth was especially concerned to underline and communicate the truth that Jesus Christ is the Mediator between God and man in his prophetic work. The prophetic work is 'the disclosure of completed reconciliation and man's opening up to it.'¹¹³ Our understanding of the prophetic work of Jesus Christ in self-revelation, of his resurrection as the commencement of its fulfilment, must needs be interpreted and communicated to us by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the one eternal God in his particular power and will so to be present to the creature in his being and activity, so to give himself to it, that it can recognise and embrace and experience himself and his work and therefore the actuality and truth of its own situation.¹¹⁴

So then, it is the living Lord Jesus Christ, who by his Spirit 'expounds himself', giving the knowledge of who he is and what he has done. Moreover, it is not just information that is imparted. Rather, the recipient finds himself transformed, and given a new direction, standard, power and hope. Jesus Christ is victorious. Barth finds in Paul's conversion and commission on the Damascus Road, a dramatic illustration of the triumph of the living Lord.

Jesus is Victor in the history of his persecutor and apostle. He is this both as the One who overcomes him and as the One who ordains, arms and sends him forth to overcome, enabling him to participate as a future victor in the fellowship of his own victorious being, action, suffering and triumph, in the fellowship of his own warring and all conquering prophecy. 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away: behold, all things are come new' (2 Corinthians 5:17).¹¹⁵

Hence for Barth, the revelation and authentication of the Christian faith is Christ himself.

The question however, arises; if Jesus Christ is and does all of this work and action in the office of his prophetic ministry - what part does man play? It must be admitted that, at times, Barth almost

¹¹³ Ibid, p.221

¹¹⁴ C.D., iv/1, p.148

¹¹⁵ C.D., op.cit., p.209

seems to suggest practically none. Granted that, as has been noted above, he does this as the living Lord in the promise and power of the Holy Spirit. But does this mean therefore, that man is simply a mere 'echo' of his word and action? Barth undoubtedly teaches that Christian life in its commencement, continuance and consummation is God's act which is accomplished on the basis of God's reconciliation in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barth does not deny an active human role in participation but is rightly concerned to stress that this is to be conceived as taking place within the gracious mystery and miracle of the divine operation. It is within the God-given freedom of enabling grace that a person believes and receives Jesus Christ as the living Lord and Saviour by the Holy Spirit. Barth states it thus:

The mystery and miracle of the event of which we speak consists in the fact that man himself is the free subject of this event on the basis of a possibility which is present only with God.¹¹⁶

Barth's approach, as always, is not only to correctly interpret and understand the biblical and theological (particularly the Christological) teaching, but also to safeguard and reflect the glory of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

We may sum up by stating that Barth's insights and emphases follow the biblical order and pattern.

(i) In the first place, he keeps on insisting that it is God's plan and that it is God's activity with which we have to do. To use the language of the scriptures, it is always 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us.....' That is the starting point. We are concerned with something that God has done and is doing. It is something which he has planned 'before the foundation of the world.' Here is the foundation for our faith. There is nothing contingent about God's plan. What God is doing is not dependent upon man, not even dependent upon the response of man. It is all ultimately of God.

¹¹⁶ C.D., iv/4, p.5

(ii) In the second place, Barth reminds us that it is all entirely due to God's grace and love and mercy and compassion. Everything is 'to the praise of the glory of his grace', 'unto the praise of his glory'.

(iii) Again, in the third place, everything according to Barth, is all in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as salvation without Jesus Christ at the centre. All blessings come in him, through him, from him, by him. It must all centre upon him, and if he is not absolutely central to us we have no right whatsoever to the name Christian. 'In everything he is to have the pre-eminence'.

(iv) Finally, it is the divine word which informs us as to what God has done for us and offers to us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. This is in order that 'we might know the things that are freely given to us by God', that 'we might set our affections on things above, not on things on earth', and that we might rejoice with a 'joy unspeakable and full of glory'.

Barth takes us to the heart of the gospel and reminds us that we need to know the majesty of God, the sovereignty of God, and to feel the sense of awe and of wonder. Above all, we need to recapture the greatest emphasis of all, namely, the glory of God.

I gladly acknowledge the teaching of basic principles of New Testament interpretation by Professor E.A. Russell. It is with gratitude therefore, that I recall the kindness and encouragement which I received, and so welcome the opportunity to be part of this tribute to him according honour and respect.

Rev. Victor Sinclair

Stephen N. Williams: *Revelation and Reconciliation: A window on modernity* (CUP 1995) xvii + 180pp. Np.

There is a widespread contemporary trend to blame the errors of the Enlightenment for modernity's disaffection with Christian faith. Professor Williams follows that trend, but in a remarkably untrendy manner. He is an independent spirit who plots his own course through his own careful reflection on the evidence. His style is also distinctive, with an attractive, if at times elusive, lightness of touch. In argument he uses the scalpel rather than the bludgeon - no fierce polemics based on surface differences but a gentler yet deeper penetration to the heart of the issue.

His basic thesis is that the key error of the Enlightenment is more a matter of anthropology than epistemology, and that the theological heart of the matter should be seen as reconciliation rather than revelation. He puts this forward as a corrective to (but not a replacement for) the work of Newbigin and, especially, Gunton (whom he otherwise regards as allies) with the dominant emphasis that they place on epistemology. Barth, he claims, when read carefully, proves to be a witness for his rather than Gunton's emphasis. The primary support offered for his case is a perceptive, if selective, discussion of Locke and Nietzsche. The discussion reveals very careful and extensive reading of their writings, and has the great merit of stimulating the reader to go back and look again at those writings from the perspective he proposes. It is only in the light of a careful rereading of that kind that the validity of his well-presented case can be fully assessed.

The last two chapters move on to contemporary issues. In the first of these there is a similar careful critique of Don Cupitt's writings, where he concludes 'that the soteriological and anthropological question is central to his work, especially in the eighties' (p.132). In the final chapter he offers a brief sketch of how one might approach defending 'today the belief that God effected our reconciliation through Jesus Christ by particular action in space and time that is universally constitutive of salvation' (p.144), but he does so with fear and trepidation lest it may 'smack theologically of some brand of liberal orthodoxy'. His anxieties seem to me well founded. The two main sources to which he would appeal for such a defence are

the form of Jesus' declarations of forgiveness as recorded in the gospel records and the experience of forgiveness in human life. I am not convinced that these would bear the weight he would be placing on them. But if this final chapter does not seem to carry the same conviction as the preceding historical analysis, that is the common fate of those who have the courage to end a careful piece of historical analysis of doctrine with a sketch of how the corresponding doctrinal task might be undertaken today.

So that is not the note on which to end. The book is well worth reading for its fresh approach to some key moments in the background to contemporary theology. And the sensitivity of its approach gives promise of further valuable contributions to the British theological scene.

Maurice Wiles

Philosophical Idealism and Christian Belief. By Alan P.F. Sell, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 1995, ppi-ix, 338. £35.00

This book, as the title suggests, gives an account of how one particular philosophical view of Idealism in Britain between 1870 and 1950 relates to classical Christian doctrine. Dr. Sell gives a lengthy review of the German and British philosophical background, chiefly in Hegel and his followers, with some influence from Kant. Seven British Idealists' work is examined and, while all imbibed aspects of the above influences, they were indebted also to their own particular context. Their work was a critical analysis of current views at home and abroad. the names of the seven are T. H. Green, Edward Caird, J.H. Illingworth, Henry Jones, A. Seth, Pringle Pattison, C.J. Webb and A.E. Taylor. A great variety of thought and temperament is obvious in these seven. All had two things in common - they were influenced more or less by post-Hegelian Idealism and believed their views could, by and large, be seen as consistent with Christian belief. This is obvious in the fact that all espoused a view of Idealism which can very broadly be stated as 'the ideal is the real, the real is the rational and the rational is the spiritual'. In this context where mind, rationality and intellectual ideas were seen as spiritual over against materialism, pragmatism or scepticism, it was natural that they should see themselves as in close proximity to the church and its views. Most indeed would have

regarded themselves as loyal Churchmen. In this way God could be posited as the Absolute Mind or Consciousness, both transcendent and imminent, and the source of ethical, moral values with an optimistic view of human nature.

Dr. Sell gives a detailed, careful examination of the main content of their writings and then proceeds to measure these against what can be termed orthodox, Christian doctrine. He looks at four areas briefly: Christology and the Atonement, the Church, Eschatology and the Trinity. In each of these he comes to the conclusion that Idealism does not in fact clearly affirm the truth of these doctrines.

For our seven Idealists, the atonement does not mean an objective event and action in the life and death of Christ in which he takes our place and reconciles sinners to God but rather it represents the principle of death unto life. Moreover Christ is not the unity of God and man in one person but simply the embodiment of the idea of the divine in humanity. Further, the Church is inadequately dealt with by the Idealists who tended to skirt historical particularity and lead in the direction of a new Gnosticism. While most believed that persons were more than individuals and that the community is important for life, many did not apply these ideas adequately to Ecclesiology. On Eschatology most presuppose immortality of the soul quite different from the resurrection of the body and our hope in Christ of eternal life with God. Again while varied interpretations were given, Taylor 'comes closer than any others under review to a theological explanation of the matter' (221). As far as the Trinity was concerned Hegel's view of it as a stage on the way to philosophical formulation could not be accepted as fully Christian, while writers like Webb and Illingworth favoured a social concept and most were seriously weak on the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

Dr. Sell concludes that several came close to Christian doctrine but the more thorough-going Absolutists among them had little more than doctrinal attenuations. The verdict must be, as stated in the preface of a well-written, full treatment of the subject: 'Post-Hegelian Idealism of the period 1870-1950 provides a less-than-adequate vehicle for the articulation of what is taken to be Christian truth' (ix).

John Thompson